

The Rise of Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE)

- Why it will get worse before it gets better and with lessons for combating Violent Extremism Islam -

AVERA – COMMENTARY

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INTRODUCTION

In Member of the Federal Parliament in Belgium and BIC advisor Koen Metsu's recent published book "Disarmed – An Unequal Battle", a sobering situation is pictured regarding the security situation in Belgium.

Not only is Islamic terrorism regrouping and shifting tactics but is also spreading to an increasing number of countries. Moreover, there is a rising threat of new groups of so-called domestic terrorism including radical right and left extremism, ecoterrorism, other radical movements, and organized crime. On top of that there is also an increased probability of local and international conflicts including racial, ethnic, and religion-based violence due to geopolitical, economic, climate and migration factors. Finally, the risk of nuclear- bio- and cyberterrorism remains real.

The recent published Annual Threat Assessment Reports of the US Intelligence Community corroborates these findings¹.

A worrying but not so surprising evolution is the alarming raise of Radical Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE) movements. In this article we delved deeper into what and why of this worrying phenomenon and draw some parallels with the origin and causes of Islamic Radicalism and Extremism.

¹ <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND EXTREMISM (DVE)

In a recent published brief from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the USA, DVE was defined as individuals “operating ... without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power and who seeks to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence”².

In the brief the IC [intelligence community] assesses that domestic violent extremists (DVEs) “are motivated by a range of ideologies” with “enduring DVE motivations pertaining to biases against minority populations and perceived government overreach” as well as “conspiracy theories promoting violence” or opposition.

Those include a wide range of groups from the left (Antifa, animal rights and environmental activists, pro-choice extremists, and anarchists - “those who oppose capitalism and all forms of globalization”) to the right (sovereign citizen movements, anti-abortion activists and those deemed motivated by racial or ethnic hatreds). The U.S. security state apparatus regards the agenda of “domestic violent extremists” as “derived from anti-government or anti-authority sentiment,” which includes “opposition to perceived economic, racial or social hierarchies.”

Also, the Radical Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission considers all different forms of radical left and right groups (and other activists’ groups and movements) as potential violent and has defined radical ideologies as those who reject diversity, tolerance, and freedom of choice³, with a 2020 European report warning that right- and left-wing extremism is on the rise in Europe⁴.

As BIC-AVERA we believe this European definition is too vague and misses the deeper roots and motivation of many extremism movements and sentiments, therefore potentially underestimating or missing certain risk factors and groups. Instead, we define Domestic Violent Extremism as groups, movements or individuals who do not or no longer believe in the fairness, justice or capability of governments, government institutions and systems to adequately address (local or global) social, economic, environmental, and other issues that affect current and future well-being and well-fare and therefore justify the use of violence to create awareness, instigate change and/or advance certain goals. Note that this DVE can take on the form of rather ad-hoc violent protest movements and events, whether planned or not, such as can be

2 https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_0301_odni_unclass-summary-of-dve-assessment-17_march-final_508.pdf

3 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en

4 https://ec.europa.eu/homeaffairs/sites/default/files/pdf/09122020_communication_commission_european_parliament_the_council_eu_agenda_counter_terrorism_po-2020-9031_com-2020_795_en.pdf

observed during anti COVID-demonstrations everywhere in Europe and the Yellow Vests protest in France.

Because of the fine line between social activism and DVE and limitations of the security apparatus to collect information on its own citizens, DVE's pose a greater challenge to address than Islamic Violent Extremis. In an article published by the Rand Corporation⁵ challenges to combat DVE's include (in comparison with combating Jihadism) larger constituencies, better organization, increasing polarisation of the population to galvanise support and policies to combat them, and legal difficulties for prevention and prosecution.

Despite this challenge, we believe that by understanding the root causes of DVE we can make adequate risk assessments and predictions as well as develop strategies for prevention and minimizing the impact.

ROOT CAUSES OF DVE

Within BIC-AVERA we have internally developed the Society Building Block model (SBB) which can – among other applications - assess the cohesion and alignment of society based on several different dimensions:

- a The level to which citizens understand and **voluntary** subscribe themselves to certain principles and building blocks of society, i.e. the system of assumptions, values, ethics, world- and self-view, purpose and shared destinies that forms the basis to decide what is worth and what is not, what is right and wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is not.
- b How these principles are perceived to be true and right, for example by being supported by common scientific, philosophical, personal life philosophy or religious affiliation, as well as personal knowledge and experience.
- c How its civil and other leadership is largely a reflection of the level of embodiment/espousing those principles and how well these principles are implemented into systems, structures, projects (educational, political, economic, and social).
- d How these principles are perceived to be implemented and enforced in a way that is just and fair (for each individual and for the whole of society). Of particular importance here are 1) focus on implementation and enforcement

⁵ <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/02/domestic-violent-extremists-will-be-harder-to-combat.html>

of the spirit and not the letter of the law; 2) citizens understanding the benefit/justness of the law, even if a ruling is stacked against them.

As trust in the fairness or implementation of those variables shrinks, an increasing number of people become disillusioned and disenfranchised with the current system, opening the doors to alternative worldviews and rallying opposition against anything the current system stands for and is based on, and from there to extremism.

This is the case when governments also start failing to further increase or even maintain well-fare and well-being (including all forms of security) in society, the twin factors that give governments and institutions an implicit mandate to govern.

Based on our own trend analysis we have long predicted an increasing inability for governments and international institutions to adequately address local and global issues, whether they are financial-economic, geopolitical, ecological or health related – due to structural and other issues and mounting externalities of the current socio-economic and geopolitical system. These then go hand in hand with a clearly and measurable erosion in trust in governments, government institutions and even businesses and media⁶. As such our analysis are forecasting a further increase in polarisation, national and international tensions and the enhanced probability for radicalisation, extremism, conflict and violence and an acceleration with an increase in inequality and a stagnation of economic growth.

Several theories and research support our SBB-observations. Of particular interest is the “Global Trends 2040” report, recently published by the USA National Intelligence Counsel with as revealing subtitle “A More Contested World”⁷. The reports overview several structural forces that will make society increasing fragmented and polarised because of the inability of governments for further gains in prosperity and other aspects of human development with new forms of like-minded groups contesting against each other leading to a “growing mismatch between what publics need and expect and what the government can and will deliver”. In combination with a “more siloed information environment” it is “exposing and aggravating fault lines within states, undermining civic nationalism, and increasing volatility” with “populations in every region increasingly equipped with the tools, capacity, and incentive to agitate for their preferred social and political goals and to place more demands on their governments to find solutions”. “This widening gap portends more political volatility,

6 <https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/Knight2018-Chapter4.pdf>

7 https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf

erosion of democracy, and expanding roles for alternative providers of governance.” Also, the international system is under strain with “no single state is likely to be positioned to dominate across all regions or domains” and “a broader range of actors competing” to shape the international system and achieve narrower goals” leading to “accelerating shifts in military power, demographics”.

The report overviews several possible scenarios ranging from “a world adrift” where the nations and the world gradually descend into chaos to “tragedy and mobilisation”, where the world gradually comes together to address global issues: a conclusion that is similar with what Rabobank Head of Financial Markets Research Michael Every metaphorically called the “Star Wars” versus “Star Trek” scenarios with the world either further fragmenting and falling apart or where it starts uniting to tackle the many global challenges⁸. And while there are some hopeful signs Michael Every’s data-points are skewed more towards the former.

Also, former governor of the Central Bank of both the UK and Canada, Mark Carney, describes in his new book, *Value(s)*⁹, the inability of the current international systems and institutions to address global and national issues, leading to increasing polarisation, inequality, environmental issues, and populism, given the “narrowing of our values to market fundamentalism” in modern society, issues that can only be solved by creating a “safer, simpler and fairer financial system.”

Two other well-documented theories that have accurately predicted increasing polarisation, volatility, conflict and an increasing break-down of civil society because of socio-economic factors are the work of Peter Turchin and Joseph Tainter.

The historian Joseph Tainter, analysed, compared, and tested all possible theories that caused collapse of civilisations in the past, with out of eleven groups, economics as the one providing the richest explanatory possibilities, and concluding that societies - as they grow in complexity - yield increasing marginal returns that inevitable level off and then decline. Once that happens governments tend to increase taxes and resort to other unsustainable measures leading to increasing inequality, polarisation and vulnerability for conflict, revolt, military invasion, or other shocks such as diseases,

⁸ Michael Every of Rabobank, *There Are Only Two Logical Endpoints We Travel Towards*, March 23, 2021.

⁹ Mark Carey, *Value(s) – Building a Better World for All*, William Collins, 2021

famine, and natural disasters¹⁰. The author's – and many others – assessment is that our current government systems is past “peak civilisation”.

Professor Peter Turchin invented the new cross disciplinary science called Clio dynamics – the mathematical modelling and statistical analysis of the dynamics of historical societies and making extrapolations for today. His theory is based on a re-interpretation of Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun's notion of “collective solidarity” (asabiyya), with key data forecasting an “age of discord” with civil unrest starting around 2020¹¹.

The effects of factors such as stagnating, disrupting, or declining levels of prosperity, well-being and collective solidarity on radicalisation, conflict and violence is well established especially in developing countries, including the disruptive effects from globalisation¹²¹³¹⁴ and, more recently, as a result of an increasing power vacuum left because mounting internally challenges in Western Democracies¹⁵ that no longer are considered as the de-facto role-model. A dramatic account is given in an article of Helena Norberg-Hodge, describing how “for more than 600 years Buddhists and Muslims lived side by side in Ladakh with no recorded instance of group conflict. They helped one another at harvest time, attended one another's religious festivals, and sometimes intermarried. But over a period of about 15 years, tensions between Buddhists and Muslims escalated rapidly, and by 1989 they were bombing each other's homes”, caused by social and economic disruptions due to globalisation (e.g., the destruction of communities and self-subsistence living due to large scale mining, farming or industrialisation)¹⁶.

10 Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Cambridge University Press, 1988

11 Peter Turchin, *Ages of Discord: a Structural-demographic Analysis of American History*, Beresta Books, 2016

12 Richard Sandbrook and Romano David, *Globalisation, Extremism and Violence in Poor Countries*, *Third World Quarterly*, Sept 2004

13 Andreas Exenberger and Simon Hartmann, Working Paper *The dark side of globalization. The vicious cycle of exploitation from world market integration: Lesson from the Congo* Working Papers in Economics and Statistics, No. 2007-31

14 <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/22/has-globalization-exacerbated-ethnic-conflicts/>

15 <https://institute.global/policy/religion-conflict-and-geopolitics-2017>

16 <https://www.localfutures.org/globalization-and-terror/>

As extreme as this seems, the recent economic, social, and cultural decline of the rural American states due to offshoring and globalisation has had a similar effect on polarisation, radicalisation and in some cases even violence. The choice seems for many between escaping their grim reality and prospects in alcohol and (legal and illegal) drugs – with the number of drug overdoses deaths dramatically on the rise - or resist the current system and authorities.

Today we can also observe in Europe many of the symptoms overviewed above, further exacerbated due to COVID-19, including a stagnation in well-being and economic mobility/progress for the lower and middle class and the resulting acceleration of vocal new ideas, ideologies, values, identities, group etc. resisting government and institutional authorities and narratives.

APPROACHES FOR TACKLING DVE

It is very tempting for governments to apply their expertise in countering Islamic violent extremism, which include the mobilisation of the security apparatus and the censoring of radical and hate speech. However, both options are a slippery slope, not only because legally there are many issues but also because they go against the essence of principles of secular democracy.

Westerns governments might feel handicapped in comparison to more authoritarian states (Russia and China, but also some Gulf-States) to deal with dissent and limit heterogeneity within society. We should however not forget that the any internal stability of these countries has less to do with their drastic actions to curb opposition and more with the ability to further enhance prosperity for most of its citizens (in the case of China and the Gulf States) and the ability to force a national identity - often on the back of the further polarisation of the world (in the case of Russia and China).

As such rather than fighting those alternative world-views (of course the use of violence must be adequately dealt with, but this is rather a reactive strategy than a proactive) – which will eventually lead to a further erosion of trust, alienation, polarisation and perceived confirmation of oppression -, we believe it is a better strategy to deeply understand why an increasing part of the population perceives the current world-view, institutions and governments to be failing and what is the attractiveness and feasibility of alternatives.

Within a society that is based on the values of Enlightenment, all sorts of intellectual tensions are normal and beneficial. However they can easily become unhealthy when the organizing principle/strategy of a collective or the authorities itself is perverted by those who are in charge of it for the benefit of one group over another other, or when holding on to an organizing principle/strategy when it is not suitable any longer in its ability to harmonize tensions (within people, society, other cultures, and nature), leading to the promotion of a distorted psychotic world-view on the one hand and a neurotic acceptance of it on the other.

The well-regarded philosopher Jürgen Habermas considered that Enlightenment is an “unfinished project” and argued it should be further complemented and corrected, in part through discourse ethics as a basis of a collective learn process for developing a higher-order societal paradigm¹⁷. Several socio-evolutionary theories, such as Spiral Dynamics and Integral Theory, have also described how individual, groups and societies evolve through a kind of meta-Hegelian process, through different hierarchical organized levels of paradigms each based on a different set of values that are – as they move along the hierarchy – able to handle more complexity and heterogeneity in society. The shift to a higher-level society is instigated by rising externalities that cannot be solved within the current society paradigm and the inability of a society to further improve well-fare and well-being for one group that does not come at the expense of another group (or another nation, culture, the future, or the environment) – symptoms that are currently very present. Or in the words of Habermas “New knowledge about the objective world” alongside “social crises,” create “cognitive dissonances.” These dissonances propel societies to adopt novel modes of understanding and interaction [and organization].

Our SBB-model contains the tools to facilitate this process, with the current decline in cohesion and alignment in society considered to be symptoms of a major paradigm shift. At the core of the model is a holistic meta-model that can analyse, understand, and integrate alternative world-views – with their underlying believes, assumptions, values, and strategies to interact, manipulate and organize the world and society – on a multiple of dimensions and levels. On each dimension and level reality (worldview) and self-identity (self-view) are defined, together with what that means for the relation between the two, i.e., the place, purpose, interaction and/or meaning/purpose of human into this reality/worldview. Through the model it is easy to pin-point the root causes and nature of distortion(s) within a certain worldview and self-view, as well as the gaps, tensions and conflicts between such worldview and self-view. Within each analysis lies the seed to solve those distortions and conflicts, either by finding a common denominator and integration on a higher level, redirecting (instead of fighting) them back to their root or expanding to the next level or additional

¹⁷ <http://bostonreview.net/philosophy-religion/brandon-bloch-unfinished-project-enlightenment>

dimensions. These then become the core of a well-crafted change-management strategy.

The theories of both Joseph Tainter and Peter Turchin are in essence very pessimistic: historically, civilisations once over their peak are irreversible into decline – a decline that can be either gradual or swift – and subject to chaos, till they get superseded by a new form of governance. However, as Peter Turchin pointed out, for the first time in history we have both the data and scenarios of our current path as well as the tools, solutions, and technologies to change our trajectory. What is currently lacking is global leadership.

DVE AND RADICAL ISLAM

There are several lessons we can learn if we apply above DVE framework to Radical and Violent Islam Extremism.

Much of the root causes of Islam fundamentalism find their origin in the decline of the Islam civilisation, a trauma where the Islamic world has still not fully recovered from. Was the decline due to straying from their religion or because of grave injustices committed to them? And as such is the struggle mainly within oneself, the Muslim community or with the outside world, questions the Muslim world has still not found answers to but have greatly influenced the motivations and focus of different modern Islamic ideas and groups, including those advocating authoritarian, radical and violent approaches.

Characteristic in case of collective trauma is a narrowing down of the worldview and self-view, i.e. a regression to a more closed, exclusive and closed minded perspective. With it also comes a decline in traditional Intellectual Islamic thinking with its pursuit of perfection and unity in being, thinking and doing; and an ideal society based on a common ethic of harmony, fraternity, and justice.

Instead came a ethnocentric world-view that is focused on advancing political and worldly power, effectively cutting out the heart of Islam in the process. The result is an excessive focus on authority, conservatism and morality that not only promotes cultural stagnation and further economic and technological backwardness and a political ideology that is also increasingly at odds with the liberal values of the enlightenment. It is an important reminder to the West, where today we also find an

increasing stagnation and sometimes even regressive world-view thinking, exemplified in the rise of populism and power politics instead of statesmanship.

The inability to integrate this (political and ideological inspired) Islamic world-view and identity with those of the international order leads then to a vicious circle of social and economic exclusion; the sense of discrimination and injustice associated with it; resisting (dominant) society and its values; withdrawing to oneself and the old cultural (and therefore also religious) values; and the further social and economic exclusion that results from this: all facilitating further frustration, resentment polarisation, opposition, radicalisation and potential internal and external repression and violence.

Contrary to some other religions and ethnic groups, the infiltration of Western Culture into Muslim society through economic, cultural, and educational models has rather created a culture of fear, anger and defeat instead of one of adaptation¹⁸. According an UNRISD-report¹⁹ that belief that the (Islam) world would secularize as they modernize has not been well founded. Instead, it has created for many Muslims a deep sense of alienation and instead strengthened the cultural and self-identification with Islam. As such any path to integration can only yield results by focusing on the restoration of the intellectual Islam tradition with a holistic worldview focused on advancing peace, harmony and prosperity for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Our SBB-model indicates that such a worldview is compatible with the philosophy and worldview of enlightenment but has considerable tensions with the current implementation of it (for example the excessive focus on materialism, consumerism, capitalism and individual liberalism and the effects on human values, solidarity, inequality, the environment etc. - all aspects that are not surprisingly also currently being questioned in the west)²⁰. Therefore, we believe that a worldview is possible that almost fully integrates the values of the Enlightenment and Islam, leading to way for peace, harmony, and prosperity for all.

However, the process of developing such an integrated worldview is hampered by the lack of general accepted role models, leaders, and authorities in the Islam world on

18 Hoda Baytiyeh, have globalisation's influences on education contributed to the recent rise of Islamic extremism? Globalisation, Societies and Education, April 2019

19 Jeff Hayens, Religion, Fundamentalism and Ethnicity: A Global Perspective, UNRISD, 1995

20 <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/five-pillars-build-more-inclusive-europe-towards-islam>

the one hand; and a stagnation in humanitarian intellectual exploration in the West due to – as Mark Carney states – the dominance of value over values.

Moreover, with the mountain challenges the current world order, also domestically, is facing we can expect both an increase in radical and ethnic-racial thought in the West against Islam (and other ethnicities) and a more vocal and active opposition against Western values (in similar way countries like China, Russia and Iran are currently openly challenging Western resolve) and justification of their ideology.

Again, it will be leadership that will determine integration or further disintegration.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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